

Bob Dylan: *Together Through Life* (Columbia Records)

by Peter Stone Brown

If Bob Dylan's previous studio album, *Modern Times* was about (among other things) finding love or maybe just romance, in a world, where some sort of impending doom lurked waiting around the next corner, on the new, *Together Through Life*, he's decided, well there's nothing much you can do about it except sing the blues, and if you're going to sing the blues, then you might as well make it swing a little have a good time doing it.

The blues has been the one constant in Dylan's nearly five decades of musical adventures. It dominated his very first album and there's maybe two albums that don't have a blues song in structure, and it's dominated every album since he returned to songwriting after a long layoff with *Time Out Of Mind*. And make no mistake about it, Bob Dylan can be a great blues singer, up there with the very best, when he wants to be.

Dylan's initial work (meaning the '60s) was so devastatingly brilliant – and to see why, all one has to do is compare his songs with similar songs by his contemporaries – that ever since he's been saddled with the impossible task of not only being Bob Dylan, but the myth of being Bob Dylan. And it is the myth that he's played with endlessly, like a cat with a mouse, doing everything he can to destroy it, yet holding on to it at the same time. Ultimately, every attempt at deflating who he was only ended up adding to the myth.

Lost in the myth, is that the music is what it's always been about for Bob Dylan. It's what drives him, it's his first love, and if the title of this album signifies anything, it's that. What makes Dylan fascinating and what's earned him his reputation as one of the greatest American artists is his absolute refusal to stand still. It's death to him. The meaning of, as well as the sound to his work is always transient. What comes in second, or maybe third behind the lyrics, and the myth is that seen as a whole, Dylan's work and maybe his greatest achievement has been an extensive exploration into American music and by extension American culture.

While much of Dylan's work in the studio and on-stage has been off the cuff, and whatever happens happens, in the past 15 years at least, he's been more consciously in search of a sound. Following the success of *Time Out Of Mind*, he decided he could achieve the sound he wanted on his own, for whatever reason using the name Jack Frost.

(Those who pay attention to album credits, Jack Frost appeared on 1990's *Under The Red Sky*.)

Together Through Life is easily the best Jack Frost production yet. The sound is loud, bright, punchy and clear, with all the instruments coming through. The arrangements are thought out and definitive. (The arrangements will probably change once Dylan does these songs onstage, but that's another story.)

For the sessions Dylan used three members of his road band, longtime bassist Tony Garnier; drummer George Recile, and Donnie Herron who plays steel, guitar, banjo, mandolin, trumpet, and while not listed in the album credits, violin. Augmenting this are guitarist Mike Campell, of Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers, who also plays mandolin, and David Hidalgo of Los Lobos on accordion and guitar.

Hidalgo and Campbell's contributions give the album its punch and its spark, while Herron, much like Garth Hudson did in The Band, provides the texture. He's the glue holding it all together. After seven years playing hundreds of shows together, Garnier and Recile have become an extremely tight rhythm section. Whatever excesses Recile had when he first joined Dylan's band, where you wondered if a fill would end on time have been reigned in and careful attention has been paid to Garnier's bass sound. The result is you can actually hear what he's doing and what an excellent player he actually is. Much has been made in the press as well as in the online interview at Dylan's official site of the album having a sound reminiscent of Chess and Sun Records. That's not entirely accurate, though on the blues songs, the bass in particular does have the Chess sound. While the blues dominate, the album crosses Dylan's usual wide range of stylistic genres - Hidalgo's according touches on not only Tex-Mex, but Zydeco, Cajun and polkas - the sound and feel of the album is cohesive throughout.

The songs are not necessarily hard hitting in impact, and frankly were written that way on purpose. Much has been made that all except one are a lyrical collaboration with Robert Hunter, best known as lyricist for the Grateful Dead. Ultimately it's not important, though I'm sure someone out there is busy trying to discern who wrote what line. These songs are meant to be taken as face value. While the usual references are there - it's a good idea to be well read to listen to Bob Dylan, along with having a good knowledge of film - these songs do not dive deep into the mystic. That said, they have a way of creeping back into your mind, almost haunting you in a way that makes you want to hear them again. Certain lines hit you at certain times, in fact they have a way of sneaking up on you, in a way that you end up

thinking about what the line may really mean such as the title of the opening song, "Beyond Here Lies Nothing."

It's an album in which the landscape the songs are written against is as important as the songs themselves, and it's a shadowy, often menacing, sometimes violent landscape, the landscape of a fading America. That menace is found in Campbell's guitar, Hidalgo's accordion, and most of all in Dylan's voice.

Ongoing throughout this album, throughout life, is the search and more importantly the *struggle* to find love, but also friendship, in the belief that love and only love is the true sustaining force in life. Yes these songs are written, and sung with the full knowledge that love rarely lasts, and often the singer is left simply contemplating the shadows as night turns to morning. Dylan's great trick in this is that the past, present, future, and the desires, hopes, as well as loss and even regrets are all one.

Despite whatever bleakness lies in the lyrics, Dylan is having a great time singing this stuff. That of course is what the blues is about, rising above. He uses the increasingly gravelly remains of his voice to great effect. One of the best moments is near the end of "My Wife's Home Town" a rewrite of the Muddy Waters classic, "I Just Want To Make Love To You" (for which songwriter Willie Dixon is credited), where he alternates between phrasing like Muddy, and phrasing like Howlin' Wolf.

This isn't an album where you can pick one or two songs, and say they're the definitive track. If one could pick a song as sounding like arrangement-wise, the typical Bob Dylan song, that would be, "I Feel A Change Comin' On," much the way "Mississippi" was on "*Love And Theft*." The melody, one of the nicest he's come up with awhile has echoes of his work with The Band. More accurately it's the sound one always hoped would evolve from that collaboration. All the songs have what is perhaps a deliberate familiarity to them. The difference this time is the music and the production is spot on. There's not a note that's out of place, though sometimes on "If You Ever Go To Houston," the omnipresent accordion riff can be a bit much. At the same time, the way Hidalgo uses the accordion to recreate Little Walter's Harmonica on "My Wife's Home Town" is brilliant.

"Life Is Hard," the song that initiated this album could be Dylan's best attempt yet at writing a '40s style ballad.

There's been a tendency over the past decade to proclaim every Dylan album a masterpiece, which is unfortunate. At this time, I wouldn't

put it in that category. What it is, is a good, solid album of songs that have a way of growing on you, where the music, the sound, the feel and the groove, are just as important, if not more important than the lyrics. If there's a problem with this group of songs, it's that Dylan's current style of writing songs, borrowing lines from old songs, whatever he happens to reading, and innumerable other sources rolling around in his mind, is starting to approach being formulaic and more about craftsmanship than inspiration. However, if there's one thing I've learned in listening to Bob Dylan for most of my life, it's that he never stays in the same place too long. I remember wondering when *Nashville Skyline* came out, if it was gonna be those kinds of songs for the rest of time, and ten years later having similar thoughts during the "gospel period." That said, *Together Through Life* is the first Dylan album, you can put on and dance through the whole thing, and maybe that's good enough for now.